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## Changing boundaries and evolving organizational forms in football: Novelty and variety among Scottish clubs

### Citation for published version:

Adams, A, Morrow, S & Thomson, I 2017, 'Changing boundaries and evolving organizational forms in football: Novelty and variety among Scottish clubs', *Journal of Sport Management*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 161-175. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2016-0286>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1123/jsm.2016-0286](https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2016-0286)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

Journal of Sport Management

### Publisher Rights Statement:

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**Article Title:** Changing boundaries and Evolving Organizational Forms in Football: Novelty and Variety among Scottish Clubs

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**Journal:** *Journal of Sport Management*

**Acceptance Date:** February 1, 2017

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2016-0286>

**Abstract:**

This paper presents a novel theoretical conceptualisation of football clubs and empirical evidence as to how supporter groups, owners and others engaged to resolve threats to their club. We use boundary theory to understand the evolution of two football clubs’ ownership, financing and governance structures, and demonstrate how the blurring of club boundaries was linked to engagements in interface areas between the club and other social groups. We argue that the appropriateness of different combinations of ownership, financing, and governance practices should be evaluated in terms of how they support effective engagement spaces that negotiate relationships with co-dependent social groups. Conceptualising football clubs as boundary objects provides some specific insights into changes observed in Scottish football clubs. However, this approach is relevant to other situations in which club success is dependent on co-operative engagements with multiple social groups that have both convergent and divergent interests in the club.

## Introduction

A football (soccer) club is much more than its legally constituted form. Whilst clubs display considerable resilience through turbulent social, sporting and economic times, what constitutes the ‘club’ changes - sometimes dramatically - as it re-negotiates its relationships and form within the network of social worlds upon which its existence depends. Football clubs are ambiguous entities that co-evolve with many social worlds, serving multiple, often conflicting, functions for different people and communities. Despite evidence of co-operative engagement between the club and social groups, these groups often have divergent interests and objectives for this co-operation.

Providing a generalised understanding of how football clubs determine their objectives and how they are structured, managed, financed and governed has proved difficult to capture (see, for example, Gammelsæter & Senaux, 2011; Hamil, Michie & Oughton, 1999; Morrow, 2003), with prior research suggesting that football is a site of complex social interactions. This paper explores the potential of applying boundary object theory to offer insights into the ownership, financing and governance of professional football clubs in general and within the Scottish professional game in particular. Boundary object theory emerged as a way of understanding complex social phenomena (Bowker et al., 2015; Star & Griesemer, 1989) and has been applied to a range of empirical topics that share many of the attributes recognised in prior research into football club management. In particular, we look at the blurring of boundaries between supporters, owners, financiers and governors associated with two Scottish football clubs. In these two cases, we identify the changing identity and relationships of supporters as the two clubs in question (Heart of Midlothian FC and Clyde FC) respond to substantive threats to their survival. Insights from boundary theory and the notion of boundary objects help make sense of the growing diversity and novelty in the ownership, financing and

governance of professional football clubs in Scotland. For example, the greater the turbulence in the social worlds that form the social infrastructure of a specific club, the greater the diversity in the way individual clubs are financed, governed and owned. While Scottish football is embedded in a very particular social, sporting, geographical and economic context, it is our contention that the findings from this study will have relevance in other complex football and non-football contexts.

Professional football in Scotland is currently organized by the Scottish Professional Football League (SPFL), a group of 42 member clubs which participate in one of four divisions, overseen by the Scottish Football Association (SFA), the game's governing body. Taken together, these two organizations provide an institutional structure within which professional football operates, akin to that found in many other countries. Organized professional football in Scotland spans three centuries, two world wars, many economic cycles, and turbulent political debates, during which time its clubs have also enjoyed some notable international footballing achievements. In recent decades, however, these successes have become scarcer as Scottish football has struggled to adjust to changes in the economic structure of the European football field and the consequent redistribution of money, while at the same time suffering from local management crises (see, for example, Morrow, 2015, 2011). However, there is evidence of considerable resilience among Scottish football clubs participating in organised league competitions with 81% of the current clubs competing in these leagues for at least 50 years and 57% competing for over 100 years (Adams, Morrow & Thomson, 2016). Since the early 1900s, almost all clubs have adopted a limited liability company form (Crampsey, 1986). Furthermore, these clubs have for the most part exhibited relatively stable ownership and governance structures, in the sense that shares were concentrated in an individual or family for long periods of time, albeit with periodic changes in owners (see, for example, Morrow, 1999, pp. 77-86, 1987; Vamplew, 1988, pp. 287-294).

Recently, however, there has been a significant shift away from the close held limited liability company, which we argue is a result of turbulence and disruption in the social infrastructure of Scottish football clubs. However, given that different clubs will be affected by this disruption in different ways, they are likely to negotiate different solutions and relationships with the social worlds with which they interact. Twenty out of the 42 clubs<sup>1</sup> in Scotland now adopt ‘non-conventional’ ways of governing, financing and owning their clubs, but there is considerable diversity in these solutions. They include majority supporter ownership of limited liability companies, supporter representation on club boards of directors, clubs part financed by supporter subscriptions, hybrid supporter-company joint ventures, hybrid supporter-public sector organisation joint ventures and community-interest companies.

In this paper, we analyze this growing novelty and variety in how football clubs are organized in Scotland. The recent emergence of different approaches, after such a long period of homogeneity, makes Scottish football a valuable empirical site. The lens of boundary object theory offers additional insights into the changes observed in Scottish football clubs, and provides the potential to consider implications for competitive sport in Scotland and in other situations where organizations act as interfaces between different social worlds.

The paper begins by offering a conceptualization of football clubs as boundary objects, explaining how heterogeneity and co-operation co-exist within professional football clubs and the importance of boundary management through key interface areas. The following section provides an overview of the social infrastructure of Scottish football in order to contextualize our case vignettes. Details of our research methods and sources of data will then be provided. To illustrate changing club configurations and related social identities of supporters, we then

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<sup>1</sup> Despite comprising almost half of the actual number of clubs, these clubs only account for approximately 25% of fans attending Scottish football. Typically these clubs are small and playing in the lower tiers of Scottish football. This situation is changing, however, with many larger clubs actively exploring new organizational forms, governance structures and modes of financing.

present our two empirical-based vignettes. The paper concludes by reflecting on the merits of conceptualizing football clubs as boundary objects and on the critical boundary management practices that should be considered by those involved in Scottish football, and in other sporting or geographical contexts.

### **Conceptualizing football clubs as boundary objects**

Boundary theory, which was developed to make sense of complex social interactions (Star & Griesemer, 1989), is used in this paper to understand how a football club negotiates its relationships and organizational form within the network of social groups or worlds upon which its existence depends and with which it shares boundaries (Gal, Yoo & Boland, 2005). Similar to other objects that have been analyzed using boundary theory (see, for example, Briers & Chua, 2001; Fox, 2011; Gal, Lyytinen & Yoo, 2008; Håland & Røstad, 2015; Meier, 2015; Parker & Crona, 2012), the football club can be understood as loosely-structured, multi-dimensional and ambiguous when viewed from a general perspective, but translatable into a more concrete, unambiguous form when viewed from the perspective of an individual group. This ambiguity of definition and purpose is necessary to maintain the delicate balance between being simultaneously concrete enough and abstract enough to be ‘useful’ to members of different social groups (Bowker & Star, 1999, pp. 305-306; Stoytcheva, 2015), enabling multiple and/or shared representations of the object (Fischer & Reeves, 1995). Drawing on boundary object theory, it is our contention that the resilience of a football club will depend on its ability to remain differently useful to a broad range of different social worlds.

Football clubs are often presented as sites of contestation; complex environments which are home to disputes over power and influence among key social groups<sup>2</sup> (Hognestad, 2009;

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<sup>2</sup> These groups include shareholders, supporters, fan-based organizations, commercial partners, sponsors, players, agents, tax authorities, local communities, local government, other football clubs, the media, creditors, national and international football institutions, public health organizations, local businesses, third sector

Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016; King, 1997; Morrow, 2003, pp. 43-73; 1999, pp. 164-180; Nash, 2000). While such disputes are often club specific, at the same time they need to be understood in the context of changes in the wider political, social, and crucially, financial infrastructure of football (see, for example, Gammelsæter & Senaux, 2011). Disputes are commonly found between supporters and commercial organizations (notably media companies), between owners / directors and supporters, and between governing bodies, leagues and clubs. Conflict often emerges from different interpretations of the performance of clubs derived from a lack of consensus as to their purpose, direction and rationale. Yet notwithstanding their differences, different groups (and in particular key groups such as directors / owners and supporters) frequently co-operate. A football club's social groups will, depending on circumstances and context, both at times emphasize their common or shared identity of the club (convergent interests), while at other times focus on tailoring their particular notion of the club (divergent interests) (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008). For example, one might reflect on supporters claiming 'ownership' of their club irrespective of actual legal rights, or articulating the oft-repeated view that "football without fans is nothing"<sup>3</sup>. Such statements often arise in circumstances where there is a sense of dissatisfaction, perceived or real, around a club's performance, ambition, motivation or decision-making as epitomized in its directors or owners.

Yet at the same time, there may also be co-operation between clubs' different social groups (Star & Griesemer, 1989). These might involve match day attendance, the purchasing of season tickets and merchandise, involvement in community activities, or support for 'the club' in the face of criticism from the directors, managers, supporters of other clubs, the media or elsewhere. Even when supporters are unconvinced by the directors (and their management and vision for the club) or by the manager or players, there remains a willingness to support

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organizations and political parties.

<sup>3</sup> This quote is commonly credited to the legendary former Celtic manager, Jock Stein.



the team, because fundamentally that is what supporters do. Each of these groups has different desired outcomes from its relationship with a football club. Nevertheless, there exists a loose form of shared identity of the football club that make it a recognizable shared space for interactions among these different social worlds (Winget, 2007). The football club can therefore facilitate engagement between diverse groups by offering a shared point of reference that allows the translation and mediation of different values, ideas and interests (Fischer & Reeves, 1995; O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008). An important insight from boundary object research is that there is no need for the social worlds associated with a football club to reach consensus prior to engagement or collaboration (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995; Star & Griesemer, 1989): a perception of future achievable mutual outcomes may be sufficient.

Gal et al. (2008) highlight how change in boundary objects in turn enable change in both the infrastructures and the social identities of groups. As such, the boundary object forms and reforms relationships with the social identities of groups with which it shares common boundaries and with elements of the social infrastructure within which it is embedded. Social infrastructure is a term used to define that which is required to make something else run or operate (Star & Ruhleder, 1996) and often consists of a series of taken for granted standardized practices, modes of communication, artefacts and interfaces. However, what is taken for granted in one social world may mean something different in other social worlds, creating the potential for conflict when these social worlds overlap in interface areas (Gal et al., 2008). Whilst the social infrastructure of football clubs can often be stable for long periods of time, during times of disruption or dissatisfaction with aspects of a club’s performance or behaviour, members of the different social worlds associated with clubs can become more vocal and active. If these interface areas are not available, there is little possibility for the mutual interests of these social worlds to integrate in some form of co-operative action, which then creates conditions for conflict and dispute. Of particular interest in this paper are situations in which

engagement processes have taken place in interface areas, enabling groups to derive or alter club-related social identities, challenge taken for granted practices and transform a club's social infrastructure. These interface engagements can alter the balance of power between and within social worlds, changing the identity or nature of those worlds (Gal et al., 2005; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008). In effect, disruption in any element of a club's social infrastructure can result in the boundaries of the club becoming more blurred and potentially malleable.

Star and Griesemer (1989) use the example of a library to illustrate the boundary object concept. As a shared repository of knowledge that is accessed in different ways by users from many social worlds for multiple purposes, a library is a socially constructed boundary object that offers the potential for engagement and co-operation without requiring consensus of values or outcomes from individual users. The library is an interface area, where interaction between members of different social worlds allows for the possibility of collaboration or co-operative engagement.

In a similar vein, a football stadium can be seen as a critical interface area where many of a football club's different social worlds interact (Bale, 2000; Zagnolli & Radicchi, 2010). The supporters (of both teams) engage in the stadium on match days to participate in a spectacle, paradoxically acting as both co-creators and customers of the product (King, 1997). That spectacle is then sold on to other social groups, notably media companies, and thus the stadium can be considered as a studio or film set. A stadium may also be seen as a source of financial value: for example, directly as a physical space to display advertising and other marketing material or as an asset providing security for club borrowings; and indirectly, as a catalyst of economic activity for local shops, bars and restaurants. The stadium can also be considered in a negative light: a source of noise, conflict, trouble and aggression, creating fear in certain communities. The stadium may be used for youth teams and women's football or hired out for community functions and charitable activities. It can be used as a venue for social

transformation initiatives such as ‘Show Racism the Red Card’ or public health interventions such as ‘Football Fans in Training’. A stadium can also be considered an important symbolic or topophilic part of the identity of a local community or any supporter diaspora (Bale, 2000).

Other football club interface areas will be contingent upon the nature of the overlaps between different social worlds, but these may include AGMs, supporter forums, social media, websites and blogs, as well as artefacts such as the match day programme. The football club as a boundary object shapes and is shaped by the activities in these interface areas and continually re-negotiates its relationships with its social infrastructure and with the social identities of other worlds (Gal et al., 2008). Within these interface areas, football clubs undertake a series of boundary management activities that are intended to normalize the interaction and sense-making of different groups. For example, club governance, a form of boundary management, can be seen as an on-going struggle to maintain convergence of interest whilst respecting the divergent views of the club’s social groups (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008; Parker & Crona, 2012). The creation, shaping and reshaping of boundary objects is thus an exercise of the powers of different social groups (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995; Star, 2010), with boundary management activities likely to be shaped by the relative powers over the club that each social world possesses at any point in time. Paradoxically, these boundary management activities include maintaining the ambiguity of meaning of a football club. More specifically, it is the existence of blurred boundaries which enables the network of collaborative practices to persist despite divergent interests among the relevant social worlds.

### **The social infrastructure of Scottish professional football**

This section provides an overview of the social infrastructure of professional football in Scotland in order to provide a meaningful context for our two vignettes. In Scotland, as elsewhere, we find clubs which are markedly different in terms of size, structure, financial

strength, history, sporting achievement, aspiration and social roles. Of the 42 senior football clubs in Scotland, only the 12 clubs playing in the top league (Premiership) consistently have a squad of full-time players. The remaining 30 clubs compete in three lower divisions and have squads of mostly part-time players. Attendance data demonstrates the lack of homogeneity among SPFL clubs: while the average home attendance for all clubs for the fifteen year period to 2014/2015 is 5,152, there is a standard deviation of 10,756 and a range of 337 to 53,825.

Our two vignettes are based on clubs of very different sizes. In 2014/2015, Heart of Midlothian had an average home attendance of just over 14,000 with an estimated income from ticket sales of €8.4m, making it the fourth largest Scottish club and equivalent to a mid-ranging English Championship club in attendance terms. This contrasts with Clyde which, in the same season, had an average home crowd of only 513 and gate income estimated at around €0.23m, making it one of the smallest clubs in Scotland.

Scottish football has a long history of domination by two clubs, Celtic and Rangers. On only 18 occasions since the first season of league football in 1890/1891 has a club other than Celtic or Rangers been crowned champions of the top division. Prior to season 2011/2012, these two clubs also dominated financially, generating approximately 70% of the turnover and accounting for between 55 and 60 per cent of home match attendance in the top division (Morrow, 2015).

### **Turbulence in the infrastructure**

However, the Scottish football social infrastructure involves interaction with other social worlds, including other football leagues and transnational competitions and crucially media organisations. Turbulence in the finances and power relations in European football in recent decades has been well documented (see, for example, Deloitte, 2015; Morrow, 2014) and this has had a significant impact on Scottish professional football and on individual clubs.

For instance, whilst European club revenues have grown every year for the last 19 years at a compound average growth rate of 9.5% (UEFA, 2015), this increase has been concentrated in the major football leagues in larger European countries where media companies have been active in bidding up media rights. In the last five years, aggregate league revenues in England and Germany, have increased by €1,484m (61%) and €717m (46%) respectively, but in contrast fell by €50m (4.2%) in Scotland (UEFA, 2015). Modifications to the structure of pan-European competitions like the UEFA Champions League, have further privileged, in both sporting and financial terms, clubs located in countries with large media audiences.

The turbulence in Scottish football's social infrastructure arising from these macro level financial changes, coupled with poor corporate governance and financial mismanagement, resulted in many Scottish clubs facing substantive threats to their existence (Morrow, 2015; 2006). This turbulence resulted in many clubs building up unsustainable levels of debt, reducing squad sizes, moving from full-time to part-time squads, falling attendance levels, cuts in players' wages, and in extreme cases clubs collapsing into administration or liquidation (Cooper & Joyce, 2013; Morrow, 2015). One prominent consequence of this turbulence was the liquidation of Rangers in 2012, a club which had only ever played in the top division of Scottish football. The reasons for Rangers' financial collapse were complex and multi-faceted but the bottom line was that one of the major clubs in Scotland was excluded from the Scottish Premier League<sup>4</sup> (SPL) and UEFA competitions (Morrow, 2015). The liquidation of Rangers, and its subsequent re-admission to the lowest professional league, resulted in a major disruption in the power relations between the different social worlds associated with Scottish professional football and individual clubs. This in turn led to uncertainty around previously taken for granted

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<sup>4</sup> The SPL was the predecessor body to the SPFL. The SPL only had responsibility for the top division, the other three divisions being organised by the Scottish Football League. But the two leagues were merged to form the SPFL in 2013.

assumptions associated with football clubs and their role in the culture, identity and politics of particular communities, whether geographical or social.

The liquidation of Rangers resulted in serious tensions between and within different sporting, financial and social worlds that extended beyond that individual club. These tensions centred on the perceived conflict between sporting integrity, previous financial misconduct, motivation of club owners and future financial implications (Morrow, 2015). Frustration with how the football institutions attempted to resolve the disruption led to the passionate engagement of football supporters in many interface areas in all Scottish clubs. Here supporters sought to disrupt the balance of power by pressuring club directors and representatives of the SFA and SPL to reject financial logic and instead impose sanctions predicated on sporting integrity.

The Rangers crisis, coupled with wider financial turbulence in Scottish football, contributed to a high profile, broadly based political discourse, led by the Scottish Green Party, on the ownership, governance, financing, accountability and social value of football and football clubs in Scotland<sup>5</sup>. Part of this discourse has involved questioning many taken for granted assumptions as to the power dynamics, shared identities and roles of football clubs in relation to the social worlds within which they are embedded. Underpinning much of the discourse was an assumption that greater community and supporter involvement in ownership, financing and governance would enhance the future resilience of clubs, and the value they provide to society.

The aim of the Green Party was to re-define football clubs as community assets and to legislate for greater powers to be given to supporters including a privileged right of club ownership. In response to this campaign, the Scottish Government established an Expert

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<sup>5</sup> The Scottish Green Party sought to include a “supporters’ right to buy” (their football clubs) provision in the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill (CEB) debated in the Scottish Parliament during 2014.

Working Group<sup>6</sup> to consider “potential ways to increase and improve supporter involvement in the governance, financing and operation of professional football clubs in Scotland” (WGSIFC, 2015, p.5). This resulted in a series of recommendations, which emphasized improving co-operation and communication between different social worlds but, significantly, without seeking to reach a consensus on the most appropriate club structure or approach to governance (WGSIFC, 2015, pp. 20-21)<sup>7</sup>.

Within this turbulent political, social and financial context, Scottish clubs responded by adopting different and bespoke solutions, some more radical than others (Adams et al., 2016; WGSIFC, 2015). Given our conceptualization of football clubs as boundary objects located within turbulent environments, an absence of homogeneity in ownership, governance or financing practices or changes thereto is unsurprising. Any club is shaped by and in turn shapes, the shifting configuration of social worlds, social infrastructure and power dynamics within which it exists (Boland, 2015). For example, some clubs worked within their existing organizational structure or forms of governance, looking for ways to reduce costs or raise additional finance. These included: efficiency savings in back up staff, reducing players’ wages or squad sizes, going part-time, selling ‘star’ players, seeking new individuals with deep financial pockets to bail them out, or restructuring debt with their banks and other creditors (McGarry, 2015; Wilson, 2014).

However, more significant responses were also observed. While the majority of Scottish clubs continue to play their home games in their original stadia which date back to around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a strategy adopted by some clubs during the last two decades

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<sup>6</sup> The Working Group on Supporter Involvement in Football Clubs (WGSIFC) was made up of representatives of the key stakeholders in Scottish football and an independent Chair (one of this paper’s authors).

<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, the Scottish Government launched a consultation in late 2015 to establish the level of support for a range of options in relation to supporter involvement in their football clubs, specifically: right to influence, right to govern, right to bid and right to buy (Scottish Government, 2015).

or so of financial distress has been to re-locate, selling the land for retail or domestic housing and building a new, smaller stadium. The most recent example was St Mirren which, after spending 115 years at its Love Street stadium, moved less than a kilometre to the purpose built Paisley 2021 stadium in 2009. The sale of the old ground to a supermarket retailer financed the building of the new stadium and allowed the club to clear its debts (St Mirren FC, 2016). Whilst this strategy is rational from a business world perspective, it can be subject to strong, emotional protests from supporter groups and local communities and a major point of conflict between supporters and the club owners (see Vignette 1).

Interestingly, in two earlier cases (Clyde and Livingston, previously known as Meadowbank Thistle), their stadium relocation was from old established communities to what are referred to as new towns, specifically Cumbernauld and Livingston (see Vignette 2). Four new towns were created in Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s as part of a major redevelopment strategy to replace poor housing and to act as spaces for industrial development. Although these new towns were considered to be successful projects in many ways, they were often criticised for lacking a sense of shared identity or community. While club owners saw the new towns as the best option for creating an adequate fan base and hence a sustainable club, the authorities were enthused by the potential social contribution that could be built around having a football club within their ‘new’ communities.

Other responses focused on club structure. Some smaller clubs (Clyde, Stenhousemuir) adopted new organizational forms such as Community Interest Companies, a form of social enterprise appropriate for organizations that wish to use their profits and assets for the public good (see Vignette 2). Another strategy was to sell shares to supporter groups, providing new finance, enhanced supporter ownership, and in some cases leading to 100% supporter/community ownership (e.g. Motherwell, Dunfermline Athletic, Stirling Albion). In other cases, a hybrid financing and ownership structure has been put in place as part of a



journey towards supporter/community ownership (e.g. Heart of Midlothian, St Mirren) (see Vignette 1) or to provide a broader and more inclusive ownership structure (e.g. Hibernian, Partick Thistle, Rangers).

Such changes are little short of revolutionary given the history of individual or family corporate ownership model within Scottish football, and the resultant emphasis on the prioritization of shareholder interests. There still remains hostility in Scotland to the notion of supporter financing, ownership and formal inclusion in club governance (Berry, 2014; Lamont, 2015). However, the enthusiastic response of supporters in a number of clubs to enhanced involvement in financing, ownership and governance, coupled with evidence of positive outcomes arising therefrom, has led many involved in Scottish football to view supporter involvement as a proactive strategy, rather than considering supporters as ‘lenders of last resort’.

Even more pertinent in the context of this paper, the deterioration in the financial infrastructure of Scottish football and of its clubs have substantively disrupted the social identity and power of supporters. Limited income from broadcast media has resulted in Scottish clubs being highly dependent on ticket income and local sponsorship. Turbulence in the balance of power between social worlds, has encouraged some supporters to challenge many of the taken-for-granted assumptions associated with their club’s social infrastructure, for example, the assumption of the merits of the ‘benefactor owner’ / concentrated ownership model (Beech, 2010; Cooper & Joyce, 2013; Morrow, 2012). Supporters have questioned how their clubs are owned, managed and financed and whether they can contribute more to their club’s future success or survival beyond buying tickets and vocal encouragement on match days.

## **Empirical evidence from Scottish football clubs**

Recent evidence from two clubs as to how owners, directors, supporters and communities more generally have responded to turbulence in their social infrastructure through negotiations between their overlapping social worlds will now be presented after a short overview of our research methods.

### **Research methods and data collection**

The empirical content for this paper is drawn from two exploratory case studies (Ryan, Scapens & Theobald, 2002; Yin, 2014) involving football clubs undergoing major changes in response to considerable turbulence in their social worlds. The field work for both studies was undertaken during the period while the clubs, Clyde and Heart of Midlothian, were experiencing substantive threats to their existence and transitioning between ownership structures and/or organisational forms. Whilst the timing of these transitions was different, our cases are aligned with the decision to transition in periods of turbulence.

The empirical content was collected using a mixed method research strategy (Brewer & Hunter, 2006; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007) and consisted of a mixture of primary data collected through semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participatory research observations (Ryan et al., 2002) and secondary documentary data. The authors were able to engage with the key actors involved in these transitions and attempted to gain as rich a set of empirical data as possible under the circumstances. The difficulties associated with negotiating access to organisations in a state of transition are well recognised (Berry & Otley, 2004; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Ryan et al. 2002; Yin, 2014) and this led to different methods of data collection for the two cases. However, as can be observed from Tables 1 and 2, access to the key actors involved in the transition was achieved in both cases.

The primary data collection for the Heart of Midlothian vignette was collected from an ongoing participatory case study (Berry & Otley, 2004) with the Foundation of Hearts Future Governance Working Group. One of the authors was co-opted onto the working group enabling him to carry out observations and data collection whilst participating as an active member of the group. Thus data has been drawn from a range of formal and informal interactions with all the significant actors involved in the club’s transition. This included participation and observation at key meetings, analysis of internal documents, engagement in discussions that informed the collective thinking of the group and informal, unstructured interviews. An overview of the key participation events that the researcher attended is set out in Table 1.

While it was not possible to record the various meetings set out in Table 1 and other informal interactions, detailed field notes were kept, along with records / minutes of relevant meetings. This primary data was complemented with secondary data from sources including the football club website ([www.heartsfc.co.uk/](http://www.heartsfc.co.uk/)), the website of the Foundation of Hearts ([www.foundationofhearts.org/](http://www.foundationofhearts.org/)) and The Heart of Midlothian Museum.

In the case of Clyde, the study was part of a research project commissioned to review the ownership structure of Clyde Football Club (Supporters Direct & University of Stirling, 2009). This secondary source document provided the historical context of the project which led ultimately to its transition to a Community Interest Company. This was followed up by a review of the transcripts of the interviews which were carried out in spring 2008. The interviewees were purposively selected on the basis of their knowledge, experience and position held within the football club itself, and with key actors in the Clyde Development Consortium (CDC) or the Clyde Supporters Trust (CST). The details are set out in Table 2.

These transcripts were complemented by documentary analysis which was used to capture changes that have taken place since the initial field work and the subsequent change in club structure. The sources of this data included the websites of the football club ([www.clydefc.co.uk/](http://www.clydefc.co.uk/)) and that of Club Development Scotland (<http://www.clubdevelopment.scot/>).

Whilst the main data collection for each case was undertaken separately, the analysis of this data was undertaken collectively by the authors using an iterative, interpretive approach (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994; O'Dwyer, 2004). The interview transcriptions, field notes and relevant documents for both vignettes were reviewed by the research team, leading to a summary of the two cases and the identification of preliminary themes. The next stage of the iterative process involved the interrogation of the data drawing upon the relevant theory and concepts identified in the literature review (Hennink et al., 2011; O'Dwyer, 2004). This interpretive analysis led to the identification of a number of key themes including interface areas and social identity formation, enabling the range of data sources to be integrated and interpreted using a common framework based on the theoretical discussion presented in section 2. The following sections present the findings of the two cases.

### **Vignette 1 — Heart of Midlothian FC**

The most prominent development in recent times regarding ownership and governance structures in Scottish football relates to one of Scotland's largest and oldest clubs, Heart of Midlothian FC (Hearts). The financing arrangements, discussed in detail later, that rescued the club from administration in 2014 saw supporters transformed from frustrated bystanders in a failing company autocratically controlled by one person, to potential collective owners of a club with no debt. This vignette illustrates the role played by what was a residual interest, the supporter community, in the ownership and governance transformation at Hearts.

Hearts was founded in 1874, first playing at the Meadows parkland in central Edinburgh before moving to the Gorgie area in the west of the city in 1881, where it is still located. The club first leased a field in Gorgie known as Old Tynecastle but in 1886 moved to a new ground, Tynecastle Park, which remains its home to this day. Since then, the club has enjoyed two golden eras, from 1891 to 1906 and from 1954 to 1962, winning several major Scottish trophies during these periods (Watson, 2005, p. 15, p. 48; Purdie, 2012, p. 15). Outside these two periods, the club won no major trophies, other than the second tier league title, before success in the Scottish Cup in 1998.

The modern era for Hearts has seen many highs and lows, both on and off the field. Winning the Scottish Cup in 1998 triggered a brief period of overspending on player transfer fees and wages, culminating in severe financial difficulties and cut-backs. Chief Executive Chris Robinson concluded that the only viable solution would be to sell Tynecastle Park to eradicate the club's debt, resulting in widespread anger among the club's supporters. Finally in 2005, after a frantic period of negotiation, Vladimir Romanov, a Lithuanian banker, obtained a controlling interest in the club after he provided financial guarantees that the club would continue to trade without selling Tynecastle Park, perceived by supporters as its spiritual home.

There followed another turbulent period for the club, involving a sequence of football manager sackings and financial mismanagement. This left many supporters bewildered and frustrated by the actions of the eccentric owner. Romanov promised to spend over £50m on a new main stand at Tynecastle Park, but supporters' concerns over the seriousness of this plan were proven to be correct, as all that was constructed was a scale model. Despite winning the 2012 Scottish Cup Final, Hearts finally collapsed into administration in June 2013 with accountancy firm BDO appointed temporarily to run the club.

As evidence emerged of the precarious financial state and problematic governance of the club the Foundation of Hearts (the 'Foundation') was formed in 2010 by a group of

Edinburgh business people<sup>8</sup>, with a number of supporter groups subsequently joining it in 2013. The Foundation is a not-for-profit organization established as a company limited by guarantee with the ultimate aim of achieving fan ownership of the club. It had been closely following events at Hearts and by June 2013, over 6,000 fans had pledged to subscribe a minimum of £10 a month by direct debit to help save the club. There would be no financial benefits to subscribers and many sceptics doubted the willingness of members to make ongoing monthly payments over a sustained period.

After Hearts had collapsed into administration, BDO set a deadline of 12 July 2013 for interested parties to submit bids for the club. Three bids were received but in August 2013, the Foundation was given preferred bidder status to make a Company Voluntary Agreement with Hearts' creditors.

After a difficult and tense period of negotiation with creditors in Lithuania, Hearts was brought out of administration in June 2014, with the new owner Bidco (1874) Limited (wholly owned by Edinburgh businesswoman and Foundation member, Ann Budge<sup>9</sup>) providing £2.5m to save the club (McLauchlin, 2014). Ann Budge became the Chairwoman and Chief Executive of Hearts. The deal involved a commitment to transfer ownership to the Foundation within five years. In return, the Foundation agreed to provide an up-front payment of £1m and further payments of £1.4m in the first year and £1.4m in the second year, as working capital to stabilize the club's finances. Funds raised over and above this would then be accumulated over the following years to repay the loan provided by Ann Budge.

By the beginning of 2015, over 8,000 fans were now making monthly subscriptions to the Foundation. It was clear to the board of the Foundation that their aim of supporter

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<sup>8</sup> Alex Mackie (initial chairman), Jamie Bryant, Brian Cormack, Donald Ford, and Garry Halliday.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Budge was one of the first women to make significant inroads into computer science in Scotland. In 1985, with Alison Newell, she launched Newell & Budge, specializing in bespoke software-based IT systems. The business grew to a multi-million pound consultancy and in 2005 was sold to French IT company, Sopra Group.

ownership of Hearts had a good chance of succeeding financially. The Foundation board therefore turned its attention to the crucial issue of future governance. There had been several examples in the UK of fan ownership running into difficulties (Pitch Invasion, 2010; Szymanski, 2015, pp.170-172). The difference here was that there was time to consider carefully different possible governance structures. At other clubs, there had not been time because the fans had taken control immediately after a period of mismanagement or administration. The Foundation board was determined to create an enduring ownership model which would meet its members' expectations, the needs of the Club and also assist other clubs in similar situations.

At the Foundation board meeting in January 2015, it was decided to set up a Future Governance Working Group. The terms of reference of the group were: “To identify, consider and provide recommendations on future structures for the governance and running of the Foundation and, in due course, the Club”. The first meeting in March 2015 consisted of a ‘brain storming’ session at which directors aired their views on suitable ownership and governance models. There was mention of this meeting in the May 2015 *Foundation of Hearts Blog* to members (Foundation of Hearts, 2015). It was made clear in the blog that, further down the line, as the options for long-term ownership and governance became clearer, there would be open consultation with members so that directors could understand their priorities and concerns.

In July 2015, there was a half-day joint meeting of the boards of the Foundation and the Club, together with senior management of the Club and other members of the Future Governance Working Group. The Club directors and management team first explained their roles to enable Foundation board members to understand better the Club's business and how it is managed. There followed a discussion of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of fan ownership in general, with particular emphasis on the threats. It was also agreed

that future meetings of the Future Governance Working Group would include board representatives of both the Foundation and the Club. This was seen as a necessary development as, although both the Foundation and the Club already had separate governance practices and procedures in place, when they are formally brought together, they will function as a group. So existing structures would need to be modified, ready for when the Foundation takes control.

The transformation in the fortunes of the club, both on and off the field, was so dramatic that within two years of taking over the club, Ann Budge announced plans for a £12m redevelopment of the main stand, which by then was over 100 years old (Swan, 2016). Financing the new stand would be achieved from a variety of sources including financial reserves of the club, benefactors, commercial sponsors and the Foundation, but crucially no debt. The deal would mean a delay of up to two years in the transfer of control to the Foundation but this was considered a small price to pay for the completion of a modern stadium without incurring any debt. Members of the Foundation voted 99% in favor of the new financial arrangements in an online ballot in May 2016, and the new stand is due to be completed before the end of 2017.

Meanwhile, the Future Governance Working Group had been developing a possible structure for governance and running of the business after the Foundation takes control. This in essence develops boundary management practices at the interface between different social infrastructures with the aim of normalizing the interaction between previously separate groups (Gal et al., 2008). The main aims of the new structure are: to ensure the financial viability of the club; to provide optimal conditions for the club to achieve sustainable football success; and to build a genuine relationship with supporters and the community<sup>10</sup>. Although proposed plans have not yet been presented to members for consultation at the time of writing, it is expected

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<sup>10</sup> It is expected that proposals for long-term governance arrangements for the Foundation and the club will be set out in a consultation document in 2017.



that there will be a dual board structure. The tiers of governance and decision-making will have the following hierarchy: Foundation membership, Foundation directors, Hearts shareholders in general meeting (with the Foundation holding 75.1% of the shares), and the club directors and management. But whatever precise structure is eventually chosen, it will be different from the concentrated ownership structure traditionally found in Scottish football and, given the size of the club, is likely to attract considerable interest from the media and the general public (Foundation of Hearts, forthcoming).

Making the new ownership and governance structure work for a relatively large club represents a considerable challenge, not just in the short term but also through potentially difficult times that could arise in the future. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that the new structure will prove to be successful and resilient. The club has a number of suitable attributes: a large loyal fan base located in a prosperous city; strong united supporter groups which include many individuals with relevant professional expertise; a current owner intent on getting the business into shape before passing ownership to the fans; and no debt. If all goes to plan, Hearts will become the largest fan-owned football club in Britain by 2020.

This vignette illustrates the role played by supporters in the evolution of the football club boundary object. It also shows how the social identity of the supporter community has been transformed over time as a consequence of relational processes that have taken place at the interfaces between different social worlds within which Hearts is embedded (Gal et al., 2005).

The unstable setting resulted initially in supporters moving from being football fans to a protest group. This highlighted weaknesses in the club's governance and emphasizes the role of boundary practices in seeking to resolve conflict in situations of power imbalance (Parker & Crona, 2012). The Romanov takeover very briefly restored their football fan social identity, before the re-emergence of supporters as protestors. More importantly, in the final stage, the

fans provided the necessary financial security to save the club from the very real threat of liquidation. This contribution was recognized by the production of an official club strip which contained the names of every Foundation pledger, symbolically recognizing the supporters' financial contribution and granting them the same privilege as commercial sponsors (Hearts FC, 2015). Crucially at this stage, alliances and co-operative work emerged between previously fragmented supporter groups, local business people and politicians (Boland, 2015). This was most visible in the inception of the Foundation, set up to take forward the vision of supporter ownership. The result is a trusted relationship with a new owner, predicated on the ongoing financial commitments made by the supporters and the agreement that, within a specified period of time, the club will become fully supporter owned. Each stage of this process has arguably resulted in new interface areas, changes in the power balance in Heart's social infrastructure, shifting identities and a new boundary object emerging out of the residual categories generated by the inadequacy of the previous object (Star, 2010).

## **Vignette 2 – Clyde FC**

*Not many institutions or limited companies have lasted almost unchanged for 130 years. After all we've been through, it's no minor triumph that we are here to tell the tale* (Clyde FC, 2016a)

Clyde FC (Clyde) is Scotland's first fully democratic Community Interest Company, with a one-member-one-vote democracy. Founded in 1877, Clyde was associated with the industrial burgh of Rutherglen in the south-east of Glasgow. The club started out playing at Barrowfield Park and moved to the Shawfield stadium where it became tenant of the Greyhound Association which owned and managed the facility for the next 88 years (Brown & Taylor, 1986). With the decision of the owners to move out in 1986, the football club was given two years notice to relocate. After a period of ground sharing, Clyde eventually formed a partnership with Cumbernauld Development Corporation and the then Football Trust, which

funded stadium improvements in the UK. Together, they devised a plan to build a new stadium in Cumbernauld, a new town to the North-East of Glasgow. Clyde moved to the Broadwood stadium in Cumbernauld in 1994 and played its inaugural match there in February of that year (Supporters Direct & University of Stirling, 2009).

In common with many provincial Scottish clubs, Clyde's ownership included members of family groups who had been involved with the club for a number of generations. This family involvement had been one of the strengths of the club, providing stability and a degree of financial security over the years, together with a determination to keep the club in existence in difficult circumstances in the late 1980s and 1990s (Supporters Direct & University of Stirling, 2009). However, the financial arrangements involved in the deal surrounding the move to the Broadwood stadium, coupled with challenges in increasing supporter revenue, placed a significant strain on the club's resources. This encouraged the club to consider different ownership and governance options.

During the early 2000s, the club was effectively acquired by Clyde Development Consortium (CDC), a hybrid organisation in which ownership was shared between the Clyde Supporters Trust (CST) and private investors. CST, a collective supporter ownership vehicle, was formed in season 2003/2004 after supporters realised that they would need to adopt a different role and social identity if the club was to survive in the future. CDC was essentially a pragmatic response, with the funds being used to finance the club through a Company Voluntary Arrangement (CVA) and to clear the debts to business creditors. Subsequently the club decided to simplify its corporate structure and became a Community Interest Company in 2010, allowing its supporters to have a share in the club and a vote on club affairs, while ensuring that it operates to provide a benefit to the community it serves rather than private profit.

The benefits of this move are set out on the club’s website as follows:

*Clyde FC has gone back to where it began in the 1870s, as a sports club owned by its supporters and dedicated to working within its community. That step into history is your opportunity to take the club forward.*

*The move away from the limited company format after over 100 years folds the Supporters' Trust and Clyde FC into one body, genuinely giving supporters true ownership of their football club as never before.*

*Now, as an owner of Clyde CIC, you will have a meaningful say in the running of Clyde FC (Clyde FC, 2016b).*

Similar to Vignette 1, the example of Clyde highlights the importance of alliances and engagements between different social worlds in unstable settings (Boland, 2015). Specifically, the negotiations between different groups – family shareholders, supporters and the local council - which took place within a challenging financial context, resulted in the generation of a new football club boundary object, one which seeks to better satisfy the contemporary and competing needs of different social worlds (Star & Griesemer, 1989).

The Clyde vignette, in particular the transient nature of the club since the mid-1980s, highlights the point that neither boundary objects nor infrastructures are ever stable (Boland, 2015). Unusually within Scottish football, and indeed within British football, Clyde FC does not own its stadium but is instead a tenant in a stadium owned by a local authority and managed on its behalf by an arm’s length leisure trust. Inevitably this results in the identification of different boundaries, different social worlds and different notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Meier, 2015). When acting as an interface between different social groups, in a conceptual rather than a literal sense, a stadium is invisible, taken for granted and its role undisputed as long as different groups accept the systems of practice associated with it. At the same time, however, the relational processes which surround the stadium and which occur in the interface, contribute to the formation of social identities among diverse groups (Gal et al., 2005). More generally, the stadium illustrates that football clubs can be seen as spaces where different values and ideas

can be translated and exchanged, and hence the value of a football club and in this case the value of the stadium, can be seen as something that is co-determined through the engagement and co-operation of the different social groups (NLL, 2016; Zagnolli & Radichi, 2010).

Presently, there is an impression of stability in terms of the stadium interface, evidenced in the club signing a five year extension to its stadium lease with North Lanarkshire Leisure. However, the stability of the boundary is not central *per se*. As has been well documented, the club’s historical relationship with NLL (and prior to that with North Lanarkshire Council) has been challenging (Supporters Direct & University of Stirling, 2009), resulting in the systems of practice associated with the stadium being the focus of a continuous process of negotiation between different social groups. Boundary management practices are crucial as an ongoing process of negotiating dynamic tensions between social groups and of seeking to normalize interaction between them (Parker & Crona, 2012). The following quotes (NLL, 2016) are illustrative:

*This new agreement is a win-win for both parties and we’ve shown that by working together we can support each other to achieve our shared objectives.*

Emma Walker, Managing Director of North Lanarkshire Leisure

*Negotiations regarding the alignment of the club objectives with that of NLL are ongoing.*

John Taylor, Clyde FC Vice Chairman

As such, boundary management can be presented as a process of co-ordinating and facilitating collaborations and interactions between stakeholders (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008). These may include both formal boundary management arising out of the club’s legal relationship as a tenant, but also more informal management processes arising from dialogue and networking. This seeks to align the objectives of the club with those of NLL including both financial objectives and broader sporting and social objectives (NLL, 2016).

More generally, that the contemporary structure of Clyde FC mirrors the club’s original organizational form emphasizes again the fluid and changing nature of boundary objects, infrastructures and the resultant interfaces. The following comments of the Clyde Chairman, John Alexander, are particularly pertinent in the context of this paper in terms of understanding the increased novelty and variety of football ownership and governance in Scottish football and implications arising therefrom:

*A club should only adopt a representative [supporter ownership] model if they see that it meets their strategic objectives. Being in financial trouble should not be a reason to be supporter owned. Whatever legal/ownership structure gets a club out of trouble is good. We all want our clubs stable and secure and we are all less interested in the ownership model than we are in having a successful club. ... A club should therefore adopt a broad based ownership model if having greater engagement with customers is recognized as something that could lead to greater success (the definition of success will vary from club to club) (Club Development Scotland, 2016).*

As set out earlier in the paper, recent attempts by politicians and other interest groups have sought to standardize the structure of football clubs in Scotland through prescriptions on ownership structures. However, it appears that what is necessary is an identification of clubs’ individual boundaries, social worlds and notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, coupled with an evaluation of how an effective football club manages its relationships with others in key interface areas and of the appropriateness of individual club configurations in terms of how they support local boundary management practices. It is only after reflecting on these issues that clubs should consider their appropriate ownership structure.

## **Implications and conclusions**

In this paper we have sought to articulate a theoretical approach to understanding changes in the structure and organization of football clubs, particularly in a period of considerable disruption and turbulence within the sport. Conceptualizing a football club as a boundary object emphasizes the centrality of particular social groups such as the supporters,

but more importantly their processes of identity formation. Of particular importance are the relational processes that take place in the interface where social infrastructures overlap. This study contributes to our understanding of how new boundary objects, that is new types of football club organisation, emerge. Our vignettes suggest that for a club to flourish, it should adopt appropriate boundary management practices in critical interface areas, similar to practices observed in other boundary object studies (Briers & Chua, 2001; Meier, 2015; O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008). It also appears that football clubs do not require to commensurate all of the interests of their social worlds or resolve all the conflicts that arise. Rather, drawing on Parker and Crona’s (2012) conceptualization of universities as boundary organizations, we see the football club existing in a hybrid space; a landscape of tensions in which boundary management practices contribute to an ongoing and fluid process of managing multiple tensions. These tensions are shaped by the relative saliency of the demands of different social worlds, but also by the power (im)balance within the organization and its social infrastructure.

The Hearts and Clyde vignettes illustrate marked differences in the configuration of social worlds, social infrastructure, and power dynamics in two clubs, separated by a mere 60 kilometres. Any notion of ‘us’ and ‘them’, construction of interface areas and the drawing of boundaries, rests on contextual perspectives situated in a specific configuration of social worlds (Meier, 2015). Among football clubs, the boundaries, social worlds and notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is negotiated in interface areas impacted by ownership structures, governance mechanisms, freedom to act, threats to clubs’ existence and levels of supporter involvement and engagement.

The importance of creating effective social interfaces and engagement opportunities was seen to help in aligning many of the competing interests from different social worlds. Examples from our study include the partnership dialogue and engagement between Clyde FC and its stadium landlord (Vignette 2), and the coming together of directors of the Foundation

of Hearts with the current owner and senior management of Hearts FC to form the Working Group on Future Governance (Vignette 1). As mentioned previously, complete alignment of interest and full consensus on the aims or values of a football club is unlikely to be achieved, other than in the most extreme circumstances in which the very existence of a club is threatened (Vignettes 1 and 2). The nature of football clubs and their social infrastructure means that tensions between clubs and their social worlds will always exist in some form or another, although over time the nature of these tensions and associated interface areas can change, as illustrated in the case of Hearts.

We argue that attempts by clubs to establish full consensus amongst all social worlds is unlikely to be successful and is not necessary. In the case of Clyde it appears that the perception of future achievable mutual outcomes between the local authority and the club directors was sufficient to trigger an ongoing programme of co-operation. The vignettes illustrate how the function of interface areas was to mobilize co-operative actions in order to pursue mutual objectives. This involves reinforcing convergent interests while allowing divergent ones to persist (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008). Particularly in the case of Hearts, there was evidence of the promotion of shared representations among the different social worlds as a way of building trust and ultimately creating a new social infrastructure in relation to financing the club, while at the same time allowing for changes in the power balance between social worlds and the resultant acceptance of new social identities.

Drawing on insights from O'Mahony & Bechky (2008) we argue that one of the reasons for Hearts collapsing into administration in 2013 was the absence of effective interface areas, coupled with a lack of interest by those responsible for the club's governance in monitoring and gathering information on the values of other social groups and of their desired outcomes from interactions with the club. This hindered opportunities for open dialogue to identify where and how co-operative action could take place. Ostensibly, this failure has been remedied



as evidenced by the extensive consultation that took place between Hearts FC, the Foundation of Hearts and its members, other groups associated with the club and the general public when drawing up plans for the building and funding of the new main stand.

Engagements in interface areas need to be purposeful, concentrating for example on addressing knowledge or expectation gaps (Bowker & Starr, 1999, Parker & Crona, 2012). The vignettes demonstrate how some conflicts were grounded in misplaced assumptions, lack of trust of the other party or unconscious bias. Boundary management practices that addressed these biases or misunderstood assumptions were important, even when these actions were partly intended to create pragmatic alignments of stakeholders' interests. This was evident in the interface area between Clyde FC and NLL and their attempts to develop “a new and more productive relationship” (NLL, 2016). As part of this process, there was evidence of the effective translation of the values and outcomes of one social world into the language and rationality of the other (Star & Griesemer, 1989).

Making visible power relationships, or perceptions of relative power differences, are also important boundary management practices (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). While the risks of power being concentrated in individual hands are only too apparent in the case of Hearts and Vladimir Romanov, the vignettes illustrate that clubs and their social worlds should not assume that any balance (or imbalance) of power will remain constant (Star, 2010). The Hearts vignette demonstrated dynamic shifts in the power between owners and fans. Here, problematic fans marginalized during the Romanov era became the rescuers and financiers of the club, providing resources required to keep the club in existence during a period of extreme instability. Moreover, it is these same supporters who are now continuing to provide stable, long-term finance, and who in time will become the club's owners. Exploring the history of any club demonstrates that actions exploiting those perceived as weak at one point in time, may become problematic in the future. Understanding the role of creating interface areas and novel

boundary objects appears to offer the potential for creating new ways for clubs to understand current problems and predict future problems (Gal et al., 2008). This in turn may lead to better collective solutions than any one group or community would have managed on its own.

### **Final thoughts**

Turbulence in the political, social and financial infrastructures of professional football has contributed to an evolution in football clubs' ownership and governance structures. The use of boundary theory has allowed us to demonstrate how the boundaries of organizations involved in the production and delivery of football have become increasingly blurred, evident both in changes in the identities of clubs' social groups, in particular supporters and owners, and in the emergence of new organizational forms. The blurring of a football club's boundaries is linked to the extent and nature of the interfaces present in the configuration of social worlds and social infrastructure of that club. This was evident in both vignettes, in particular the ways in which supporter groups engaged in resolving existential threats to their club through changes in the clubs' ownership, financing and governance. The importance of their ability to interface with the football club as a sporting organisation, social institution, cultural asset and business was seen to be critical.

In both the vignettes as well as in other Scottish clubs, the need for supporters and communities to involve themselves in matters of ownership, financing and governance has been driven primarily by financial difficulties and sometimes by mismanagement in clubs. But in other countries like England, it is partly a response to ever more commercialized approaches to the game which are considered by some to have altered boundaries to the detriment of supporters and local communities, and to their social identities. The successful protest by Liverpool supporters in February 2016 over proposals to increase ticket prices (coupled with a long-running campaign by the Football Supporters' Federation (FSF) in England around

pricing) (FSF, 2016) exemplifies the residual interest of supporters seeking an involvement in issues of governance and management in a markedly different sporting, social and financial setting.

Insights from our conceptualization of clubs using boundary object theory suggest that the resilience of any club requires a critical acceptance that the identities, power and interactions of different social worlds will change over time, and that short-term exploitation or marginalization of particular communities should be avoided. Encouraging participation and inclusion, rather than domination or attempted colonization, appears to lead to less turbulence and tension (Håland & Røstad, 2015; O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008; Morrow, 2011, 2015). The progress being made in assessing options for long-term governance arrangements at Hearts, forged out of close co-operation between the Club and the Foundation, is an example of how potential tensions can be avoided. Establishing means for co-operative action is something that clubs should actively seek, given its potential to leverage considerable additional resources (not just financial). Making visible to all social worlds the contribution each of them makes to the diverse range of actions necessary for a successful football club is important. It is also important not to falsely credit the actions of one group for any emergent and fragile moments of success.

This study has concentrated on a single footballing country with its own distinct economic and social context. But our findings and the concept of boundary objects will have relevance in numerous other settings in football and beyond, where there is evidence of changes in the political, social and financial environment and where organisations act as interfaces between different social worlds. These settings will, of course, involve different social worlds and groups, different boundaries and different practices. For example, the marked differences between Scottish and English football in terms of finance will result in different interpretations as to the identity of a football club, and different relationships between clubs and their social

worlds. Nevertheless, boundary theory still offers a way of improving our understanding of the complex social interactions between social groups.

An opportunity exists to develop this paper by means of empirical research. This might seek to evaluate: the complex relationships amongst ownership, financing, accountability and governance structures on the performance, resilience and perceived value of professional football clubs; and how different configurations of organisational attributes and performance measures interact to achieve different outcomes. In addition, there is an opportunity to explore related issues such as changes in the social class of football club shareholders. Vamplew's (1988, pp. 287-301) seminal work, *Pay up and Play the Game*, which gives a fascinating occupational and spatial analysis of shareholdings and membership in English and Scottish football clubs pre 1915, provides an excellent starting point for such a study, while Morrow's (1999, pp.78-83) work provides an ownership classification of clubs in these countries in 1997.

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**Table 1:** Overview of Vignette 1 participant research interactions

	Meeting date(s)	In attendance
Foundation of Hearts (FOH) Future Governance Working Group	March 2015	Special Adviser to FOH FOH Director FOH Director and Club board member FOH Director Co-opted member
Joint meeting of FOH Future Governance Working Group and Board and Senior Management of Heart of Midlothian FC	July 2015	Club board members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chair and Chief Executive</li> <li>• Operations Director</li> <li>• Non-Executive Director</li> </ul> Club senior management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Operating Officer</li> <li>• Head of Finance</li> <li>• Head of Commercial Operations</li> </ul> FOH: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director</li> <li>• Chair of board and Club board member</li> <li>• Director and Club board member</li> <li>• Director</li> <li>• Director</li> <li>• Co-opted member</li> </ul>
Future Governance Working Group	October 2015 January 2016 March 2016 August 2016	Seven members Eight members Nine members Eight members

**Table 2:** Vignette 2 interviewees’ details

Interviewee	Clyde FC	CDC	CST
	Position(s) held		
1	Chairman		
2	Secretary		
3	Director	Secretary	Chair
4	Director	Director	
5			Director
6	Administrator		